

Some remarks about the current state of Azerbaijani philosophy

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If you ask any Azerbaijani academic deeply involved in their profession about the state of their field in Azerbaijan, you probably will not get an encouraging answer. Whether they work in the humanities, the natural sciences, or another field, Azerbaijani academics give more or less the same answer to questions about the state of scholarship in this country: "Such and such field is very weak here," or sometimes, "It doesn't exist at all." I give a similar answer to anyone who asks about philosophy. But it always seems to me that my response is harsher because, in addition, I usually try to explain to questioners that the state of philosophy in Azerbaijan is even weaker than in other academic fields. This can be clearly shown along several parameters: for example, the number of articles published by Azerbaijani authors in internationally recognized journals on philosophy is many times lower than the number of articles published by specialists in other fields. However, instead of making long and tedious comparisons of these parameters, to give readers an impression of the state of philosophy, I would like to express my opinion in a short, one-sentence comparison of engineering and philosophy taken from İlkin Hüseynli: the state of philosophy is so pathetic that if Azerbaijani engineers had the same level of knowledge in their field, most of the buildings they built would collapse on our heads.

There are many reasons why philosophy is in this state in Azerbaijan. As the primary reason, one could point to the fact that the quality of education in Azerbaijani educational institutions that train philosophers, or specialists in philosophy, is very poor; there is a serious deficit of human

resources, i.e. there are very few sufficiently qualified staff who can be put in a lecture hall in front of students, etc. True, all this (unfortunately) is the case. But I would like to focus on another cause in this article. It seems to me that if you consider the unfortunate state of philosophy in Azerbaijan, you will find that the root of the problem is deeper. Although it does not seem realistic, in principle it is possible that the state or any philanthropist could turn their attention to this issue, allocate significant funds, and send several students to study at leading Western universities while simultaneously inviting several leading philosophers to work in Azerbaijan's universities. I agree that if that were the case, a lot could change. But I think that a more interesting question is this: using our own current intellectual and cultural resources,^[1] could we train philosophers who would be able to put forward high-quality (i.e. capable of attracting attention internationally) philosophical ideas and theories? Frankly, it is hard to be optimistic. It seems to me that, even if the state or philanthropists took serious action on this issue, there would still remain another serious obstacle to the development in Azerbaijan of philosophy capable of achieving international recognition.

In this article, my main focus will be to describe and define this obstacle. I would summarize this obstacle, which could be described as culturological, thus: *in Azerbaijan, the underlying intellectual background that makes possible what is currently called "philosophy" here, as well as the dominant modes of thinking, do not sufficiently support activities which could result in Azerbaijan's recognition as a country with a good philosophical tradition.*^[2] So what are the intellectual background and modes of thinking that would make high-quality philosophical creativity possible, but which are difficult to find in Azerbaijani culture? To answer this question, let us first consider the concept of the *underlying intellectual background*.

By *underlying intellectual background*, I mean a broad worldview system—i.e. science and religion, as well as philosophy itself^[3]—that has historically played a defining role in shaping the content of philosophical thought and the philosophical mode of thought.^[4] The two functions which are performed for philosophy by the underlying intellectual background must be distinguished: content and mode. The fact that both science and religion have historically served as sources of ideas in the emergence of systems of philosophical thought permits us to say that they both performed the *content* function as part of the underlying intellectual background for philosophy. Indeed, if we look at the development of philosophy in the West, we see that, since its inception, philosophy has been nourished to a large extent by both religion and the scientific worldview of a corresponding period. For example, Plato's theory of ideas, in addition to its religious roots, was in line with the scientific worldview of his time. Plato believed that ideas existed in the heavens in a place called *Hyperuranion* (the development of astronomy later disproved the existence of *Hyperuranion*).^[5]

The content function, which is performed by both religion and science as part of the underlying intellectual background, is not yet sufficient for the emergence and development of philosophy. For this there must be a *systematic, rational, and critical mode of thought* that is based on reason and related to science. A *systematic, rational, and critical mode of thought* consists of carefully and methodically considering any idea put forward in a way (most importantly) that is consistent with and substantiated by other ideas, without regard to dogmas or authority. In relation to philosophy, an important difference between science and religion is that, unlike religion, science can also perform this *mode* function as part of the underlying intellectual background for philosophy. Unlike religion, philosophy is not based on sources that have achieved authority among the masses, such as the Qur'an, the Bible, the Prophet, etc., but rather on

reason, on its crucial component: a systematic, rational, and critical mode of thought. A systematic, rational, and critical mode of thinking is a necessary component for the emergence and development of philosophy, and in its absence it is at the very least questionable to speak of the existence of philosophy.

It is interesting to note that, although religion in one form or another is an inherent feature of almost all cultures,^[6] the emergence of science and philosophy based on systematic, rational, and critical thought as a cultural event, and their transformation into tradition, began in VII-VI BC in ancient Greece and spread to other European countries at various times in history, becoming a European cultural phenomenon. What we call *philosophy* today is a product of that culture. The question could be asked, what about other cultures, such as India, China, and Islam, which occupy huge geographical areas and have rich histories: isn't philosophy a historical and cultural phenomenon related to them, too? Although it is difficult to give a comprehensive answer to this question in a small article, I would like to briefly note that if the thinkers of these cultures lack a systematic, rational, and critical mode of thought, then we must be cautious in applying the words "philosophy" and "philosopher" to them. Although a number of the ideas of thinkers from these cultures may at first glance seem to be philosophical in content, they are not part of a systematic, rational, and critical discourse. The words and writings of the Buddha, Confucius, Rumi, and other thinkers who expressed their ideas as aphorisms or the wisdom of elders were hardly systematic, rational, and critical. (A number of Islamic philosophers, such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd, are exceptions in this regard.)

The spread of philosophy to other cultures began in later times mainly as part of the process of modernization in non-European societies. For example, many modern Chinese scholars, who think that philosophy is something worthy of attention,

have tried to answer philosophical questions in accordance with the mode of thought of European philosophers. What is even more interesting is that they began to call ancient Chinese thinkers “philosophers,” thinking that philosophy was not a phenomenon alien to their culture (cf. Defoort 2001, 396.). However, as noted above, the ideas of ancient Chinese thinkers, which in many cases were not systematic, rational, and critical, did not fully fit the concept of *philosophia*. It can be concluded that the fact that modern Chinese scholars called ancient Chinese thinkers “philosophers” was simply a name chosen in accordance with the intellectual fashion of the new era.

Let's return to Azerbaijan. What about in Azerbaijan? It is clear that philosophy, which is only possible on the basis of systematic, rational, and critical thought, is not a product of the broad historical and cultural area to which Azerbaijan belongs, but has been brought from without. Based on what we know from history, we can say that Azerbaijan's became acquainted with the philosophy that emerged in Europe during various historical periods, mainly through its connections to two different broad historical and cultural spaces. This happened for the first time after Azerbaijan's accession to Islamic culture. Thanks to the ties of the thinkers of the Islamic world with ancient Greek culture, elements of systematic, rational, and critical thought were reflected in a number of writings produced by Islamic culture compared to the medieval period in other cultures. And this did not fail to impact the modes of thought of a number of medieval thinkers who are considered Azerbaijani (e.g. Bahmanyar and Suhrawardi). But, unfortunately, the philosophical mode of thought was not widespread enough among the medieval (alleged) Azerbaijani thinkers; instead, poetic and religious modes of thought remained dominant.

A new opportunity for Azerbaijan to acquaint itself with *philosophia* (as well as with the modern sciences this time) arose in the XIX-XX centuries, first with its accession to

Tsarist Russia and then to the USSR. Especially in the 20th century, with the creation of educational and scientific institutions in accordance with the modernization programs of the USSR and the involvement of more people in scientific activities, one would expect real achievements in the development of philosophy in Azerbaijan. However, in the USSR itself, the attitude to the humanities, especially philosophy, was different, primarily ideological, which resulted in the underdevelopment of the humanities compared to other sciences. During the Soviet period, very serious achievements were made in science, but there were serious setbacks in the field of philosophy. And this did not fail to impact the state of the humanities in the Soviet republics, including philosophy in Azerbaijan.

In the post-Soviet period, these shortcomings were not only left unresolved, but advanced even further. It is true that now there are a lot of people in Azerbaijan's educational and scientific institutions who seem to be engaged in philosophy. But, unfortunately, the quality of the philosophical work of the vast majority (whether as educators or researchers) is very low. The main cultural reason for this, as mentioned above, is that while philosophy is a product imported to Azerbaijan, the underlying intellectual background is not suitable to lead to a correct understanding of philosophy or its development.

To better understand the issue, let's ask a question: where is the influence of the underlying intellectual background—i.e. the legacy of the philosophy, science, and religion of the past—on modern philosophy in Azerbaijan? First, let us consider philosophy itself as the underlying intellectual background for philosophy. The hypothesis is that if a local contemporary philosophical tradition had not emerged, the development of philosophy could have been achieved in part by using the legacy of philosophers who are purported to belong to Azerbaijani culture (even though the topics they pondered are not very similar to contemporary philosophical topics).

However, to my knowledge, there no quality work has been done along these lines. Although most contemporary Azerbaijani philosophers sometimes speak about the richness of the philosophical heritage in Azerbaijan, name-checking Bahmanyar, Suhrawardi, and other well-known philosophers, the reality is that their writings and modes of thought implicitly demonstrate that this philosophy it is not a legacy for them; due to temporal, linguistic, and worldview barriers, there is no continuity between these philosophers and them. The names of these famous philosophers are needed by contemporary Azerbaijani philosophers just as a museum needs an exhibit.

Science's contribution to the development of philosophy in Azerbaijan as part of the underlying intellectual background is also in question. The main reason for this is the unsatisfactory level of development of science in the country as a whole, as well as the fact that those engaged in philosophy do not reconcile their ideas, insofar as it is possible, with relevant scientific knowledge, and in some cases place the value of scientific knowledge lower than that of their own fallacious ideas. The fact that most Azerbaijani philosophers do not take into account the role that science could play as an underlying intellectual background for philosophy not only deprives them of the worldview that scientific knowledge can give to a philosopher, but also prevents them from acquiring a systematic and rational mode of thought, at least in part. Of course, I would not like to claim here that the methods of the systematic and rational mode of thought used by scientists are the same as philosophical methods. But compared as a general mode of thought, it is clear that philosophy is closer to science in this respect than to any religion that has historically served as an underlying intellectual background for philosophy.

It would be appropriate again to emphasize here the issue I mentioned above – systematic, rational, and critical thought – as a *mode*. The issue is that even if we put aside the question of whether the content of scientific and philosophical

knowledge is compatible with each other, their closeness can also be measured by the fact that they both promote a systematic, rational, and critical mode of thought. And it follows that science, as part of the underlying intellectual background, can play the role of not only informative content, but also in terms of supporting the mode of thought. But, unfortunately, for the vast majority of people engaged in philosophy in Azerbaijan, science does not seem important either as a source of nourishment for relevant philosophical ideas, or in terms of the similarity in the mode of thought.

One of the consequences of the weakness of science as part of the underlying intellectual background for philosophy in Azerbaijan is that the role of religion, which has historically been part of the underlying intellectual background for philosophy, is expanding. (I use the word *historically* here because the role of religion as part of the underlying intellectual background in philosophy has diminished significantly in modern times.) I would not like to claim that the majority of those engaged in philosophy in Azerbaijan lead a religious life. I simply want to point out that their worldview is in some cases religious, even if not explicitly. (For example, they believe in the existence of God for religious reasons; many consider the Qur'an to be true, even if they have not read it; they think that religion will help society solve a number of problems; etc.) However, since a religious worldview has no need for a systematic and rational mode of thought, it cannot play the role of an underlying intellectual background for philosophy to the same extent as science. On the other hand, it must be taken into account that, since many religious ideas do not coincide with modern scientific ideas, to fail to take scientific knowledge into account and to rely on religion to support philosophy is to deprive philosophy of a number of important functions that it could play in our lives.

Interestingly, the fact that most Azerbaijani philosophers' mode of thought has more in common with the *mode* of thought of

religious people in many respects – i.e. irrationality in regard to some issues, a rather weak practice of systematic and critical thought – impacts the eclectic formation of their worldview. They can randomly consider true all the ideas that they like, often from different worldviews and theories, without thinking about whether those ideas are compatible with each other. For example, it is possible that you will meet an Azerbaijani philosopher who has read a lot and he will tell you things about science and philosophy at length. However, at the same time, you can assume that when that person sees a black cat on the road, he will suddenly double his speed so that the cat does not cross his path – things will suddenly go wrong. Because it is likely that, in his conception of the world, certain beliefs from religion, superstition, and mysticism have been combined eclectically with things taken from science and philosophy. And he may never ask himself simple questions, such as: “Why do I believe that when a black cat crosses the road, things won’t go right?” or “To what extent is this reconcilable with what I’ve learned from science and philosophy?”

Above, when discussing the underlying intellectual background for philosophy, we noted the role of science and religion, in addition to philosophy itself. When applying the concept of the *underlying intellectual background* to philosophy in Azerbaijan, it became clear that for philosophy in Azerbaijan, this role is played more often by religion, rather than science. However, there is another important aspect to understanding philosophy in Azerbaijani culture – literature. I do not think that it would be right to consider literature in itself as part of the underlying intellectual background for philosophy. However, if we consider the state of philosophy in Azerbaijan, one important observation is that the search for answers to philosophical questions is very close to both the religious mode of thought, as well as literary and poetic thought. In a number of works which are presented as philosophy, Azerbaijani authors seem to want to

influence the reader's emotions, rather than the mind, particularly through the use of metaphors and other artistic means. They do not approach philosophical issues with sufficient intellectual seriousness, and in some cases, lacking a sufficient understanding of the topic they are writing about, they try to fill this gap with artistic devices (sometimes with a piece of poetry) and tricks in the style of high school literature teachers who know how to write a good composition. These devices and tricks partially conceal their unprofessionalism from inexperienced readers of philosophy, and sometimes even create for their writings the illusion of distinction in the eyes of such readers. The frequency of such instances among Azerbaijani philosophical authors suggests that the gap created by the lack of a serious philosophical tradition is partially filled by the devices of style and thought derived from literature; and thus, literature in Azerbaijan seems as if it is playing the role of the underlying background for philosophy.

In conclusion, I would like to note that it is quite important to take all this into account in order to understand the underdevelopment of philosophy in Azerbaijan. In contemporary times, no philosophical tradition corresponding to the concept of *philosophia* has emerged in Azerbaijan. The fact that the dominant mode of thought among Azerbaijani philosophers is as described above casts doubt on the possibility of high-quality philosophy emerging from this culture (i.e. from people who were educated in Azerbaijan and brought up in its cultural heritage). The mode of thought, which is more religious and literary than scientific, influences emotions in some cases, but it also has a negative impact on the systematic and rational mode of thought necessary for philosophy, and sometimes precludes a critical approach to issues. It is doubtful that one can speak about the development of philosophy in a culture that tries to effortlessly incorporate elements of religious and literary modes of thought into philosophy, whether or not they are appropriate, and has an

aversion to the systematic, rational, and critical mode of thought.

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[\[1\]](#) By 'intellectual and cultural resources,' I mean mainly religion, literature, and science, as well as the broad system of knowledge and beliefs to which philosophy can be attributed, and the social institutions associated with them.

[\[2\]](#) In my opinion, this idea is applicable not only to Azerbaijan, but also to many other countries with similar cultures. But I will leave this issue aside as it is outside the scope of this article.

[\[3\]](#) Naturally, philosophy itself serves as part of the underlying intellectual background for the philosophy of later periods. An example of this is when one philosopher influences the thoughts of another. I will devote less attention to this aspect of the issue, however, because the lack of a philosophical tradition in Azerbaijan makes it irrelevant to the article.

[\[4\]](#) A similar approach can be found in Bertrand Russell's history of Western philosophy. Russell considered philosophy to be the product of two factors: science and religion (see Russell 2013, 1).

[\[5\]](#) Generally speaking, religion and philosophy are bound together by a series of questions that they share in common.

For example, questions such as “Is there a God?”; “Is the world eternal?”; “Is it striving towards a goal?”; “What is the foundation of things?”; “What is the meaning of life?”; or “How should we live life?” are questions of religion as well as philosophy, and throughout history a number of philosophers have been inspired by religion’s answers to these questions. Although religion has ready answers to these questions, it is often impossible to say in advance how a philosopher will answer them as a result of his own reflections. On the other hand, since some of the above questions are also scientific (e.g. the answer to the question “Is the world eternal?” can be sought based on the Big Bang theory known to us from physics), philosophers take note of the answers provided by science as well.

^[6] By *culture* here I mean religion, folk tradition, literature, science, and art, as well as philosophy, which largely determines the thought and actions of various social groups.